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1. Introduction: Reading Russian Literature, 1980–2024—Literary Consumption, Memory and Identity

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Reading literature has always been a more collective experience in Russia than in most European countries. Group readings simultaneously allowing 30 to 40 people to keep abreast of the most sought-after texts was a fairly common practice in the late-nineteenth century,¹ as were the numerous (illegal) circles for self-education (*kruzhki*) that mushroomed in imperial and Soviet Russia (Leibov and Vvodin 2020). In Soviet times, reading samizdat texts often took place in group settings which brought participants into close physical contact (Von Zitzewitz 2020). Even when reading alone in the privacy of one's apartment or in the anonymity of the subway, one could easily envision oneself as part of a community of like-minded readers.

'Dangerous texts' of banned (pre-revolutionary) authors circulating in clandestine editions were particularly conducive to the creation of real and imagined communities which united readers both synchronously and diachronically with previous generations (Parthé 2008). In the 1960s, for example, it became fashionable to challenge the cultural memory of the pre-revolutionary past by immersing oneself in the forbidden fruits of the Silver Age (1890–1921) and cultivating a counter-discourse of this era, while ignoring official Soviet literature altogether (Boym 2001). Although not immediately an act of open resistance, engaging with potentially subversive literature was widely embraced as a means for exploring alternative identities, imagining collective selves, and asserting personal autonomy.

This volume seeks to explore the interplay between literary consumption, memory, and identity in Russia from the 1980s until today, examining both continuities and shifts in their multifaceted relationship during the profound—and ongoing—transformations of Russian society and its literary landscape. The ways in which the political and economic reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s

changed the literary field have received due attention from literary scholars, historians, and social scientists alike; researchers have explored topics ranging from the collapse of Soviet literary infrastructure (including the abolishment of censorship), the emergence of a commercial book market and the partial restructuring of school curricula to the changing status and prestige of the literary profession, to name just a few examples (Lovell 2000; Dewhirst 2002; Wachtel 2006; Dubin and Zorkaia 2011; Hodgson and Smith 2020). Changes in reading preferences and readers' behavior, accelerated by the rise of social media and new technology, have also been studied extensively (Beck Pristed 2020; Schmidt 2020), prompting some policy makers to raise concerns about a perceived national 'reading crisis.'² In general, scholars agree on two points: first, that the sacrosanct status of the printed book remains strongest among older readers who were raised during Soviet times and, secondly, that Russia's contemporary reading audiences are increasingly fragmented (Menzel 2020). To what extent this is a 'worrisome' or specifically 'Russian' development and even a matter of 'national security,' as the authors of the National Program for the Support and Development of Reading argued in 2006, is of course open to debate ("Natsional'naia programma podderzhki razvitiia chteniia i metodicheskie rekomendatsii" 2006).

Despite the considerable body of scholarship on new or evolving reading trends, as well as the diversification of reader audiences and their tastes in Russia, the extent to which contemporary practices of engaging with literature are still capable of fostering a sense of collective identity and memory remains largely unexplored. We are interested in examining to what degree literature continues to serve as a shared interpretative framework allowing people to reflect on their place and that of their peers in contemporary Russian society, even if such visions of collective selfhood turn out to be illusory and readers experience feelings of disunity or isolation in an increasingly individualized world. What the authors of this volume aim to explore are therefore not so much the circumstances under which literature is produced and consumed, but rather the 'stories' shaping these processes, that is the nexus between literary production and consumption on the one hand, and the formation of (collective) identity and memory on the other. Specifically, contributors engage with the following questions: How do ordinary readers and literary professionals use literature to reflect on their own lives and the fate of society as a whole? What tools do literary texts offer to people to 'inscribe' themselves in Russian history, act as 'witnesses' of their time and engage in different forms of activism? In other words, how do autobiographical and collective memories cross and interact during acts of reading and reflecting on literature against the background of the seismic changes of the last 45 years? With these questions in

mind, the authors of this volume analyze the reception, appropriation, and instrumentalization of radically different writers and genres, ranging from Yevgenii Yevtushenko to Kirill Medvedev, and from diaries and memoirs to anti-war poetry and Young Adult LGBTQ+ literature.

In several chapters, the volume's main interest leads to a focus on the empirical reader: either a specific individual or a group of people whose reactions to a particular text we have on record, either in print or online. In Russia, research on empirical readers has a venerable if interrupted tradition starting in the late-nineteenth century with Nikolai Rubakin's trailblazing studies on the reading habits of various social groups (Rubakin 1975; Senn 1977; Reitblat 2009, 289) and spiking in the 1920s when readers' borrowing behavior in public libraries was carefully monitored and increasingly steered in the 'right' direction by the state (Dobrenko 1997). Similar to many other disciplines within the social sciences, scholarship on contemporary readers largely came to a halt during the mid-1930s (Dobrenko 1997, 27) and was only fully resumed in the 1960s, notably by the Department of the Sociology of Reading at the Lenin State Library in Moscow.³ While Dmitrii Ravinskii is the only contributor to this volume who uses the quantitative methods for which the Department of the Sociology of Reading became known, some authors approach the reader in a comparable way by examining clearly articulated expressions of support for or disapproval of texts, their authors, or even fellow readers. In these chapters, the emphasis lies on individual readers, even if their reactions may not necessarily be very individualized, echoing instead the collective idiosyncrasies of their 'interpretive community.'⁴

By foregrounding the responses of readers over the literary text itself, these contributions may appear to pursue goals similar to those once propagated by David Bleich (1975) and other practitioners of subjective reader-response criticism. However, Bleich's interest was mainly pedagogical and driven by a desire to develop a teaching method for working with students (Tyson 2006, 178). In contrast, several authors of this volume draw inspiration from the work of historians and literary scholars such as Beth Holmgren (1995), Miriam Dobson (2005), and Denis Kozlov (2013), who have studied letters to the editor, diaries, memoirs, and reader surveys in order to assess the full impact of such epoch-making publications as Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* or Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone*. In addition to studying more 'traditional' ego-documents, our contributors analyze online resources, ranging from discussion lists and social reading platforms to TikTok videos. Building on the work of Michel de Certeau (especially his concept of reading as 'poaching') and Henry Jenkins's well-known studies on fan activities, some authors focus particularly on fan poetry and other materials produced by readers (de Certeau 1984; Jenkins 1992).

Diverging from the emphasis on an empirical reader, other chapters rely on a more abstract notion of readership that recognizes the productive and potentially mobilizing nature of reading. In these

instances, the reader's creative role in co-constructing the meaning of a literary text, a process extensively theorized since the advance of poststructuralism, is highlighted through textual strategies aimed at uniting readers around specific social issues and encouraging political agency. While the individual empirical reader steps into the background here, these contributions concentrate on texts that evoke particular responses from their audience, thereby enabling the exploration of alternative realities and communities.

Divided into four parts, this volume is organized primarily along thematic lines. The first two chapters by Dmitrii Ravinskii and Josephine von Zitzewitz differ in scope, yet they both address profound shifts in literary production and consumption as a result of major political developments—the dismantling of the communist system in the first case and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the second. Drawing on statistical data, Dmitrii Ravinskii provides an overview of key trends in mass reading since the early 1980s while reflecting on the demise of the Soviet tradition of 'careful reading and the search for hidden meaning.' Focusing on a unique translation project known as the *Kopilka*-project, which builds on close teamwork and mutual editing, Josephine von Zitzewitz examines the emergence of a collective identity among the predominantly bilingual translators. Beyond their shared anti-war stance, the collaborative project has raised their awareness as a group, illustrating how reading and translating can foster a sense of connectedness.

Part II, titled "Revisiting Literary Models of the Past," concentrates on literary cults and iconic figures from the late-Soviet era and their enduring (or renewed) significance for post-Soviet readers. Focusing on the interaction between fan behavior and canon formation, Otto Boele explores the creative appropriation of 'peasant poet' Nikolai Rubtsov by ordinary readers and fans, analyzing their textual production (poems, biographical dramas) and their involvement in establishing various memory sites (make-shift house museums) across Russia. Katharine Hodgson revisits the legacy of Yevgenii Yevtushenko, a prominent figure among the 'angry young men' of the Thaw generation, and his tenacious reputation as a regime-loyal careerist. Comparing the viewpoints of literary professionals with those of contemporary ordinary readers on book review websites, Hodgson notes a shift in the assessment of Yevtushenko since his death in 2017, with critics and colleagues adopting a more lenient stance towards the poet, while younger readers no longer view him as a controversial figure. This part of the volume concludes with a chapter by Alexandra Smith on Liudmila Ulitskaia's autobiographical prose from the 2010s, in which she reflects on the community-building role of reading illegal texts by banned authors under the Soviet regime. Through an analysis of Ulitskaia's book on Natalia Gorbanevskia, *The Female Poet*, Smith shows how Ulitskaia portrays herself as a guardian of memory and a fierce critic of Stalinism's legacy.

Shifting the focus away from the empirical reader in Part II to the act of reading itself, the two chapters of Part III concentrate on notions of reading either as an infinite semiotic operation aimed at uncovering ‘hidden meanings,’ or as an empowering activity that has the potential to foster new senses of belonging. Drawing on scholarship on (over-)interpretation and conspiracy theory, Boris Noordenbos examines two relatively recent novels by Viktor Pelevin that both “perform and scrutinize a conspiratorial ‘reading’ of (the world as) text.” These novels play with the notion of an ever-expanding web of plots and conspiracies, illustrating the impossibility of maintaining an autonomous (collective) self free from entanglements in malicious designs. In a chapter dedicated to the poet and activist Kirill Medvedev, Dorine Schellens demonstrates how the author’s creative use of dialectics challenges Russia’s state-driven memory culture of the 1990s, foregrounding a narrative based on resilience and agency instead. Reevaluating the notion of literary consumption in a post-Soviet context, Medvedev’s essayistic work can be interpreted as placing renewed emphasis on the agency of readers.

Part IV, titled “Creating Publics in the Digital Sphere,” explores digital forms of literary engagement that bring together readers around shared social issues or standpoints and encourage political activism. In her chapter on feminist writing during the 2010s, Ksenia Robbe considers how the mediation of socio-political critique to broader audiences through various online platforms for feminist writing and reading is conducive to community building and the formation of counterpublics. Analyzing several poetry anthologies, Robbe demonstrates how their contributors expose the ‘systematic workings of power’ in Russia, prioritize the perspectives of the oppressed, and develop languages of care. The volume’s final chapter by Manon Junggeburdt examines how BookTok users on TikTok engage with LGBTQ+ themes in Russian Young Adult literature, using Mikita Franko’s novel *Days of Our Lives* as a case study. Based on her analysis of the 300 most liked BookToks, Junggeburdt discovers that while the fan community interprets the novel along similar lines, discussions about LGBTQ+ themes are notably less prevalent compared to other topics such as parent-child relationships, depression, and general coming-of-age related experiences.

By adopting a loosely defined time frame spanning nearly 45 years (1980–2024), this volume seeks to go beyond conventional models of periodization based on decimal logic and presidential terms. While individual contributions do draw on historiographic terms such as ‘glasnost and perestroika’ or ‘post-Soviet,’ the volume as a whole aims to identify (perceived) changes and continuities in reading habits over longer periods of time. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine undoubtedly marks a significant new watershed in post-Soviet history as well as the trajectory of Russian-language literature, prompting us to speak of a ‘before’ and an ‘after.’ As challenging as it is to take into account the latest and distressing developments within the literary landscape, especially in the face of the horrors of Russia’s war violence

in Ukraine, as editors we have decided not to confine the discussion to events preceding February 24, 2022. Instead, several contributors explore the interaction between reading and identity formation in relationship to and beyond this fateful date.

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Footnotes

- 1 For a graphic, though somewhat anecdotal illustration of this practice see Grigorii Miasoedov's painting *Reading L.N. Tolstoy's "The Kreutzer Sonata"* (Chtenie "Kreizerovoi Sonaty" L.N. Tolstogo) from 1892–93.
- 2 On the misleading equation of the crisis of the printed book with an apparent crisis of reading see Beck Pristed ([2020](#)).
- 3 See Dmitrii Ravinskii's contribution to this volume.
- 4 In the field of reader-response criticism the term 'interpretive community' was introduced by Stanley Fish ([1980](#)) to designate a group of readers with shared interpretive strategies.